Crafting Interpretation For Culture

Tuesday, December 15th, 2020
Presented by Gennadyi Gurman, Head of Interpretation
Overview

• Garden History

• Current Interpretation Strategies and Execution

• Future of Interpretation at QBG
  • Focus: Interpreting “culture”
QBG Mission and History

Queens Botanical Garden (QBG) is an urban oasis where people, plants, and cultures are celebrated through inspiring gardens, innovative educational programs, and real-world applications of environmental stewardship.

Located at the northeast corner of Flushing Meadows-Corona Park in Flushing, QBG evolved from the five-acre “Gardens on Parade” exhibit showcased at the 1939-1940 New York World’s Fair. Officially opening as “The Queens Botanical Garden Society” in 1946 after local residents saved and expanded the original exhibit, the Garden remained at the original World’s Fair site until 1961, when it was moved to its current location on Main Street in Flushing. Among the original plantings taken from the 1939 site are two blue atlas cedars that frame the iconic tree gate sculpture at the Garden’s Main Street entrance today. QBG has become a 39-acre oasis in one of New York City’s most bustling and diverse neighborhoods.
Current State of Interpretation at QBG

- Signage
- Exhibits
- Digital
  - Social Media
  - Website
- Programming
  - Groups
  - Public
  - Volunteers
  - Staff

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Signage

Types of Signage:
• Garden or Exhibit Names
• Informational Signage
• Directional Signage
• Plant Labels
• Gallery Signage

Elements of Signage:
• Consistent or Thematic Graphic Design
• Language choices
  • English
  • Spanish
  • Chinese
  • Korean
  • Others
• Illustrations
• Funders or partnerships where appropriate
Exhibits

Our Garden Collections – Plants in Context
• Habitats
• Horticultural Collections
• Ethnobotany Collections

Gallery Exhibits – Art Interpretation

With Every Fiber of Our Being by Soraya Navia

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Digital

Social Media
• Promotions
• Activities
• How-to
• Entertainment

Website
• Logistics and Info

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Programming

Group - school and other group workshops and tours

Public - individual and event-based programs

• Crafting workshops
• Festivals
• Professional workshops
• Gardening demos and Plant Care

Together Again
In-Person, On-site at the Garden | Parent & Child age 4-8
4-Week Session

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Programing pt. 2

Volunteers
• Long Term Gardening Volunteers
• Visitor Engagement Volunteers
• Community Building "Work Day" Volunteers

Staff
• Engaging visitors directly on the grounds
• Facilitating a multitude of experiences

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Learning from the Past and Looking into the Future

• Addressing “the place where people, plants, and cultures meet”
• Reviewing existing interpretation - Responding to Our Roots
• Planning future interpretation - Working Towards Justice
Addressing “culture”?

If our goal is to be “Where people, plants, and cultures meet,” we must have a clear understanding of what we mean by all three parts of our stated mission:

**People** are our stakeholders, whether staff or visitor, individual or community, engaging in-person or digitally, from near or far.

**Plants** are our collections, whether the individual “greens” or entire gardens and habitats

So how do we define “culture”? 
Responding to Our Roots

How does our Institutional History and Geographic context connect to “culture”?

- World Fairs - 1939’s World of Tomorrow and 1964’s Peace Through Understanding
- Native Land to Corona Dump
- Queens and Diversity
- Botanical Gardens in context of botanical exploitation and colonization
The World Fairs

1939 - What started as an aspirational “World of Tomorrow” with international representation, rapidly morphed into country fair-style “attractions... such as the Billy Rose Aquacade an amphitheater that had shows with water ballet, high diving, clowns, fireworks, light show projected on a wall of water, Frank Buck’s “Bring ’em Back Alive” Jungleland Village, which included a monkey island and a Seminole village, Tiny town, a miniature village inhabited by little people...”

From TLTC by Nicole Phillips

In what was called the American Commons, fair organizers opened up an area for exhibits and performances by racial and ethnic groups, including African Americans, Polish Americans and Italians. Each was given a week to highlight their cultures.

N**** Week ran from July 23–28, 1940, during the second year of the fair. With Germany's invasion of Poland and the start of World War II in late 1939, the theme of the fair changed to “For Peace and Freedom.”

NYPL Archives
The World Fairs

1964 - Part of the legacy of the 1964 World’s Fair is disseminating America’s brand of Cold War imperialism, and the man behind that mission, twentieth-century New York’s “master builder,” Robert Moses, is infamous today for his legacy of bulldozing ethnic neighborhoods such as San Juan Hill to make way for “urban renewal” projects and highways reaching towards Long Island that were part of Moses’ intention to make the Unisphere, and the Queen’s neighborhoods surrounding it, the center of his Empire of Public Works through propaganda and the privatization of public space.

From “Between Neighborhoods” a film by Seth Fein
The Land

From the **New York World's Fair 1939 and 1940 Incorporated records:**

“the reclamation of [approx.] 1,216 acres of tidal swamp -- chiefly occupied by a colossal city dump. Seven-million cubic acres of meadow mat and refuse were moved and leveled, and marshland filled in advance of the construction of the Fairgrounds; a feat still considered one of the largest land reclairations undertaken in the eastern United States. Following the clearance of the site and over the course of two years, thousands of architects, engineers, designers, artists, contractors, and trades people were mobilized, round the clock, to transform the Corona Dump into the New York World's Fair.”
The Land

Native Land to Ash Dump to Fairgrounds to Garden

• Lenape Matinecock land, part of it converted to settler farms and Prince Nursery, the rest deemed “tidal swamp” and consigned to become a landfill.

• The “dump” filled and transformed into a Fairgrounds promoting American industry.

• A garden preserved from an exhibit, taking on the stewardship and healing of the land.
The People of Queens

Queens is one of the most diverse places in the country.

How do we support such a diverse group of stakeholders?

• Highest diversity index in the country
• Most languages spoken

from "Nonstop Metropolis: A New York City Atlas" by Rebecca Solnit and Joshua Jelly-Schapiro
Botanical Gardens and Colonization, Appropriation, and Exploitation

“Cultural appropriation is taking a symbol or cultural practice out of its original context and then plunking it down somewhere else. And it becomes devoid of its original meaning. The people who are doing the extraction often are benefiting, whether through personal gain, financial gain, or entertainment.”

nisha ahuja - actor, physical theatre creator, writer, singer/songwriter, and arts educator; www.nishaahuja.com

“There is always an inherent power imbalance — it is the dominant group taking from a marginalized group. With cultural appropriation, this also often plays out in the realities of colonization: It is the colonizer taking from the colonized.”

Adrienne Keene - author of blog Native Appropriations; www.nativeappropriations.com

“Taking intellectual property, traditional knowledge, cultural expressions, or artifacts from someone else’s culture without permission. This can include unauthorized use of another culture’s dance, dress, music, language, folklore, cuisine, traditional medicine, religious symbols, etc. It’s most likely to be harmful when the source community is a minority group that has been oppressed or exploited in other ways or when the object of appropriation is particularly sensitive, e.g. sacred objects.”

Susan Scafidi - author of Who Owns Culture? Appropriation and Authenticity in American Law

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Botanical Gardens and Colonization, Appropriation, and Exploitation

Where did our collections come from?

Why were these plants collected?

How?

Interior of Nathaniel Ward’s fern greenhouse, Clapham, London, 1851 © Florilegius / Alamy Stock Photo

A horticulturist packing plants into a Wardian case ready for transportation © RBG Kew

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How Have We Addressed “Culture”?

- Themed Events and Celebrations
- Themed Gardens or Botanical Highlights
- Language Accessibility (for some)
How Have We Addressed “Culture”?

Our past practice largely falls into Multiculturalist Approach or Cultural Competency Approach:

• Encourages tolerance and conflict-free diversity, often highlights achievements as a way to downplay systemic or structural barriers and inequalities

• Highlights cultural life, cultural expression, cuisine, dress

• Downplays race in favor of talking about and celebrating culture

• Focuses attention on valuing unique worldviews of different communities

• Advocates that people and groups develop their capacity or ability to work effectively across difference by growing culture-specific awareness, knowledge, and skills

• May rely on generalizations around cultural identity as a means to understand groups and offer a sense of access

• How do we do better? How do we create just interpretation around “Culture”?

From http://aorta.coop

Approaches To Power Inequity Within Organizations
Creating Just Interpretation of Culture

- Commit to an ongoing process of self-education and coalition-building in order to create open and supportive environments and take collective, collaborative action for systemic change.
- Acknowledge systems of oppression and structural and institutional barriers based on racial, ethnic, gender, class, sexuality, ability, age, immigration status, and other differences.
- Understand race, gender, and other aspects of identity to be socially constructed, tied to complex histories, and playing significant roles in how resources and power are distributed.
- Acknowledge the existence of privilege (advantages, access, favors, and benefits to members of dominant groups at the expense of members of marginalized groups) and the opportunity to challenge oppression from a place of privilege—as an ally.
Future of Our Interpretation

Our most recently updated Master Plan includes a great opportunity to explore improved interpretation.

It includes an upcoming exhibit titled "Kids Culture Garden" that will tentatively have 5 themed sections based in answering the question "how do kids play?" built around meaningful cultural touchstones from around the world.
Making Kids Culture Interpretation Just

• Community and Stakeholder Input

• Representation, Sourcing, and Commodification

• Appreciation vs appropriation

• Individual contextualization

• Accountability
See you around the Garden!

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